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Community Organizations, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hold the first America's Great Outdoors Event in Hawaii

By Joseph Bonfiglio, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR07-11) In order to promote President Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative, the Nature Conservancy of Hawaii (TNC); community group Kāko'o Ōiwi; the UH Institute of Marine Biology; Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works Jo-Ellen Darcy and leaders of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held Hawaii's first ever America's Great Outdoors Event at Heeia Wetland adjacent to Kaneohe Bay, Oahu, March 17, 2011.

President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative in April 2010 to develop a 21st Century conservation and recreation agenda. AGO takes as its premise that lasting conservation solutions should rise from the American people – that the protection of our natural heritage is a non-partisan objective shared by all Americans.

President Obama specifically charged the Secretaries of the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, the Administrator of the EPA and the Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality to develop a 21st-century conservation and recreation agenda to reconnect the American people with the great outdoors and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers fully supports and embraces this initiative and has been engaged in AGO events across the country.

The AGO vision is to:

- Help Americans reconnect to the Great Outdoors
- Conserve and Restore America's Great Outdoors
- And ensure America's youth embrace and protect our vital natural resources

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AGO 2/2/22

In the spirit of AGO, the Hawaii event, hosted by Kāko'o Ōiwi and TNC Hawaii, celebrated efforts of local community members from diverse organizations who are engaged in a project to restore currently fallow lands in the Heeia Ahupuaa (Native Hawaiian watershed) into a working agricultural taro loi (taro pond) and restore the native wetland.

The goal for Kāko'o Ōiwi, with support from TNC Hawaii and others, is to continue community efforts to provide food security, conduct research, promote education and biological resiliency in order to foster cultural and community use within the Heeia Ahupuaa.

Darcy, who was the keynote speaker at the Pacific Command's Pacific Environmental Security Conference held in Honolulu, provided opening remarks for the Hawaii AGO event in which she stressed the importance for all Americans to achieve lasting conservation of the outdoor spaces that power our nation's economy, shape our culture and build our outdoor traditions.

She urged participants to continue to reinvigorate our approach to conservation and reconnect Americans, especially young people, with the lands and waters that are used for farming and ranching, hunting and fishing and for families to spend quality time together.

Following her opening remarks, the community groups went to the taro ponds where they instructed Darcy in Native Hawaiian taro planting techniques and provided information about the cultural importance of taro to the Hawaiian community.

After planting taro, Darcy and community members met to discuss the key elements that make up the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

Community members provided insights into how their project is directly related to the core principles of America's Great Outdoors in that it allows them to reconnect, conserve and protect the aina (land).

In addition, community members discussed their long-term vision for the site and the current actions they have underway and possible constraints they are facing to restoring this wetland. This vision supports the AGO concept that America needs a 21st century conservation ethic that builds on local ideas and solutions for environmental stewardship which connect to our historic, cultural, and natural heritage

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AGO 3/3/3

According to Brad Wong, Marine Fellow at TNC and a supporter of Kāko'o Ōiwi, "this is a wetland restoration project to return the land to taro loi production. It's the community that wants this to happen. The kapuna (Hawaiian elders) have been here for generations and generations. They know what is best for this area and they're the ones who steward the land. What we try to do is partner with other organizations and everyone in this ahupuaa."

According to Bootsie Howard, Community Coordinator for Kāko'o Ōiwi, "for me the significance is healing to the land and the people and it's also providing food for the community. I'm from Heeia and my family worked the loi. In fact we have one of our Kapuna here and she had her hands on since she was six years old and I think she's almost 80. That's Auntie Alice Hewitt. We work with our TNC partners and AmeriCorps Urban Youth. Again, our goal is to heal the people and heal the land."

According to Mark Fox of TNC, "we starting working in Kaneohe Bay removing alien algae off the reef and we noticed that we were only getting after one part of the equation. We also had to get after sedimentation coming off the land and so we were able to partner with Community Group Kāko'o Ōiwi and the state's Hawaiian Community Development Authority to provide support and staffing to them for restoring this wetland area."

"The idea from our perspective is if you can restore these wetlands, it can mitigate the heavy rain pulses when they come and keep the heavy sedimentation off the reef. So it's a one, two punch to remove the algae and help keep the sediment off the reef and actually the knockout punch is the native collector urchins that are being cultured at Coconut Island by the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology to be put back out on the reef."

"So the combination of getting the big bio mass of algae off, get the sedimentation off and restore the population of native sea urchins and that keeps the algae in check," according to Fox. "And it's also an honor for us to play a small role in the community restoration project and the cultural restoration project" Fox said.

According to Darcy, "one of the reasons for this visit is to be able to talk to people about the president's America's Great Outdoors Initiative. What we're trying to do is connect and re-connect our people with America's Great Outdoors with our recreation facilities. The Corps of Engineers has more visitor days than any other agency in the federal government at 12 million acres of recreation area and over 122 projects and not just Corps of Engineers projects, but also to make sure people are aware of the national treasure of our outdoor recreational resources."

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AGO 4/4/4

“I think that this initiative will help. Part of it is to educate people about what it is that we have and what’s available to them and how fortunate we are to have it and how good it is to be able to be outside not only for your health but also for all of our well being,” Darcy said.

“This was one of the most fun days I’ve had in this job. It’s great to be able to dig in the mud and have it be something worthwhile. I want to come back. I planted some crops today and they said that they will be ready in eight months so maybe we’ll be back in eight months to harvest,” she said.

When fully implemented the goal of the AGO initiative is:

- New urban parks and community green spaces
- Newly-restored rivers and recreational “blueways” that power economic revitalization in communities
- Stronger support for farmers, ranchers, and private landowners that help protect rural landscapes and provide access for recreation
- The reinvestment of revenues from oil and gas extraction into the permanent protection of parks, open spaces, wildlife habitat, and access for recreational activities
- And further partnership between federal agencies, non-governmental organizations like TNC

For more information about the America’s Great Outdoors initiative visit:

www.americasgreatoutdoors.gov